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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the history of the early childhood education curriculum in the United States in order to construct a contemporary postmodern curriculum understanding for young children. The paper examines: how curriculum is defined for young children; historical influences in the early childhood curriculum; and the contemporary postmodern understanding for young children. Three major theoretical perspectives influencing early childhood curriculum are described: (1) cultural transmissionist; (2) maturationist naturalism; and (3) constructivism. The paper argues that these three traditional perspectives were formed by a European male-dominant view within a single cultural paradigm. The paper maintains that a postmodernist perspective challenges the form and content of dominant knowledge and curriculum models and produces new forms of knowledge through its emphasis on breaking down disciplines and considering objects of study unrepresentable in the dominant paradigm. (Contains 66 references.) (KB)

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Critical Examination of U.S. Curriculum History In Early Childhood Education

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Purpose: This paper examines the history of U.S. early childhood education curriculum to construct a contemporary postmodern curriculum understanding for young children. (The original paper, which is currently in review for publication, has total 31 pages including four figures, one table, and four field-based case studies. 65 references. This presentation paper only shares beginning part of the original manuscript.).

Modes of Inquiry and Methods: This paper examines: How do we define curriculum for young children's learning experience? What is the historical influence in early childhood curriculum? What is contemporary postmodern curriculum understanding for young children? Over the last 13 years of the author's ethnographic field observation data from the states of NV, CA, LA, PA, NH, and FL are infused into the historical curriculum analysis.

Theoretical Perspective: In the field of early childhood education, the term "curriculum" has been exchangeablely used with "program," "model," "framework" "approach," or "guidelines." The curriculum means many different things to many different people, and curriculum takes many different forms. Every curriculum represents a choice as how to approach the education of the learners (i.e., Posner, 1992). The approach chosen depends on the beliefs and assumptions of the people that develop the curriculum. Most typically used approaches to form a curriculum are based on the following premeditated inquiries: How does learning occur? (How do human beings learn?), and how is it facilitated? (How might we teach?).

Figure 1: Three Major Theoretical Perspectives Influenced in U.S. Early Childhood Curriculum

Historical Perspectives Re-Visited: The three major historical influences in early childhood curriculum are cultural transmitionists' perspective, hereditarionas' perspective, and construtivists' perspective (see Figure 1).

Cultural transimitionists' perspective is based on the behaviorism, which views learning and development as a continuous set of changing behaviors governed by the principles of conditioned learning rather than as a series of age-bound behaviors (Morrison, 1997). By conditionally arranged external reinforces only certain expected behaviors children learn. Thus, external environment affects the organism's learning.

> [As an example, *12 month old Susan likes to touch her mom's coffee cup. It is decorated with colorful balloons. Each time when Susan's hands move toward the cup, her mother slightly hits Susan' s hand and saying "no, no, no, It's hot. Don't touch it". ..(Susan's hands move toward to the colorful cup, at the same time Susan sees her mother's face and her hands. Susan stops moving toward the colorful cup). Good! Don't touch it again. Have this cookie... This is your cup with milk in it. (Pink plastic cup). It is not hot. You can touch this. Hold your cup like this (mother shows how to hold the cup)...no, no, no, touch yours, not mine...If you don't touch mine again and use yours, then, I will give you more cookies...*]

In this orientation, learner is viewed as a powerless organism because learning and development are totally controlled by an external condition. Individual's interests, curiosities, or intellectual or emotional needs are not main considerations, but an external force will control what to learn, thus, how to and what to develop. This type of orientation creates direct instructional curriculum models (e.g., DISTAR). Within the orientation, the teacher transmits pre-existing "single-culture-value bounded" knowledge. Learning environment that is highly structured, work-oriented, and fully focused on academics.

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From the hereditarian perspective, maturationists believe that the individual organism has biologically coded schedule of development. Once a biological area is matured than development occurs, which will lead to learning. By doing so, organism affects environment.

> [As an example, parallel to Susan's case, *Kato is a 12 month-old boy. Kato's mother observes that Kato cannot understand the danger of touching "hot" cups. He cannot use his own cup independently yet. So, the mother puts her "'hot" coffee cup away from Kato, so that he cannot reach out toward the "hot" cup. At the same time, the mother holds Kato's cup for him when he drinks his milk, and she continuously gives him his milk bottle until he shows his capability of holding the cup all by himself.*]

In the maturational orientation, teachers and parents are encouraged to wait until the child's biological development indicates a readiness of taking advantage of the environment for his/her learning (i.e, Once the child is developmentally ready to grab an object purposefully, the child will use the cup.). Once nature permits growth without undue interference or restrictions the child will develop. In this perspective teachers and parents should observe the child's growth and provide experiences at fitting times. This idea is consistent with what we call European "age-appropriate" curriculum (e.g., DAP) which is rooted from Gesell's developmental theory. If a child doesn't follow the developmental theory, the child's unique individuality can be understood as "developmental delay" (Lubeck, 1996).

Influenced by J. Piaget's cognitive driven theory of child development, constructivistic orientation sees that environment and organism interact with each other. By doing so, learning and development occur. It is viewed that an organism's development is greatly influenced by biology. But the human organism is adapted to fit

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with the environment, so the structures of the mind (cognition, schema) develop ("construct") over the course of childhood better fit with, or represent, the external world. Thus, simultaneously, environment and organism's biology interact with each other. That leads to the organism's development and learning.

> [As example: *Isa is 12 month-old girl. Isa's mother gives her a plastic "sippy cup" that has a safety top with a hole on it. Since Isa seems interested in cups, maybe colorful cups, the mother buys more colorful plastic cups. Some of them have colorful balloons on them. All of the cups have a safety top on them, so that even if Isa spills the cup, it will be still safe without a milk spill. And the mother believes that it is also a good way to teach "colors" to Isa. By using the colorful cups, Isa will be able to learn colors. At the same time, it will motivate her to learn how to use regular cups. Therefore, initiated by Isa's interests and the parents' careful observation and proper environmental arrangement (more resources in this case), Isa is experiencing a safe way of using cups as well as learning colors.*]

Construtivistic oriented curriculum clearly values the importance of "rich" environmental resources. According to the Piagetian's perspective, if the child is interacting with many materials that are appropriate to his/her age and his/her interests, it will promote his/her development and learning. If the child is coming from a "poor" background or "spirituality oriented" ethnic backgrounds, there is a possibility that they may be viewed as disadvantaged learner (or sometimes identified as "learning delayed") due to the lack of experiences with concrete materials. Constructivistic orientation has not had enough capacity of multidirectional and multidimensional way of looking at and assessing young children' potentials, particularly those children who are coming from different ethnic and socio-economical backgrounds.

The construtivistic orientation has been centered and created many early childhood curricula that are logical and mathematical cognitive-test driven (i.e., Piagetian

Cognitive Tasks). Ever since the U.S. had a socio-political shock by the Soviet Union's the launching of Sputnik (1957), the nation's "schooling" curriculum including curriculum for young children had to be cognitive-driven. This socio-political shock made all of us institutionally "blind mind" by only emphasizing one aspect of human potential. Since than, the U.S. may have become one of the cutting edge high technical nations. But, we have been lost and have ignored other kinds of human potential (e.g., Gardner, 1983, 1999). So many children who do not have cognitive driven intelligence, but rather have different types of intelligences, become troubled in their "schooling." Because, the constructivistic-cognitive driven curriculum has a limited capacity of promoting and assessing different kinds of intelligences, except linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences (Gardner, 1983, 1993). Constructivistic perspective is highly important as it has been valued, but if it heavily focuses on the cognitive developmental aspect in the curriculum as it has been, it may be a developmentally and culturally incongruent curriculum framework for the current population of young children.

Discussion & Implication: The three traditional perspectives had been formed by a "well-nourished" European male-dominant view within single cultural paradigm. Later when the theoretical orientations were adapted to create a curriculum framework for young children's "schooling", a multiple way of looking at how children learn, how we educate young children appropriately, or how ever-changing socio-cultural environments affect all children's development and learning, failed. Many children and families have been troubled by the socio-culturally inappropriate theoretical orientations. Especially those children who have unique special needs due to their physical, emotional, intellectual differences and those children who are poor, or have different socio-cultural

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ethic and linguistic backgrounds. The three theoretical orientations or the curricula based on the theories do not have an enough capacity of serving diverse children's equal, fair, and congruent "schooling" experiences, but rather only have a capacity to evaluate them as "learning disabled," "learning delay," "disturbed learner," or a limited learner.

In a contemporary postmodern orientation, people perceive that we cannot continue as we have been (Lather, 1991, Constas, 1998, Giroux, 1997). We have realized that we cannot continually practice the conventional curriculum notion, such as a behavioristic scope-and-sequence oriented curriculum or Gesselian's or Piagetian's "developmental" base curriculum. The key question that we share in postmodernism is: What are the contemporary social, political, and cultural conditions under which a human act takes place, that support a person's capability to deconstruct, reconstruct, and interpret new meanings ("new-construction") of the act in a recursive manner? Postmodernism not only challenges the form and content of dominant models of knowledge and curriculum, but also produces new forms of knowledge through its emphasis on breaking down disciplines and taking up objects of study that were unrepresentable in the dominant paradigm.

We need to re-conceptualize new contemporary curriculum framework that will serve for ALL children's developmentally and culturally congruent, equal and fair learning experiences (Hyun, 1998, Hyun & Marshall, 1997). New brain based research on human learning and development (Abbott, 1997; Astington, 1998; Diamond & Hopson,1998; Wolfe & Brandt, 1998), theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983, 1999), emotional intelligence (Goleman,1995), etc. are currently influencing educators' orientation more toward multidirections than before. At the same time, the socio-political

issues of "education that is multicultural" has led to add "multicultural" component and anti-bias curriculum (Derman-Sparks, 1989) component to the preexisting early childhood curricula. But, we keep adding, never taking anything away when we care about curriculum. Thus, the problem continuously remains (Brown & Moffett, 1999). We may need a different curriculum framework that will allow teachers to be a wide awakend concious practitioner who can continelusely de-construct, re-construct and new -construct their curriculum practices. Within that kind of curriculum practice we look at ALL children in an equally fair way, as well as take teaching and learning into a wholistic journey that is personally meaningful (Greene, 1978; Kincheloe, Slattery, & Steinberg, 2000). Therefore, teachers with a postmodern curriculum framework are in the habit of asking situational questions as a *LIVED* curriculum practice:

- How do I know whether this is a real learnable moment that I take as teachable moment for the child? (Teachable Moment-Oriented)
- How do I know that this is the real emergent interests the child wants to learn and that would also lead him her to move to further meaningful experiences as an autonomous learner? (Emergent)
- How do I know that the way I negotiate with what I want to (or "have to") teach them and what they want to learn about are fairly balanced in my daily practices? How can I be sure that the "how" of "have-to-teach" will come from the negotiation with the children's personal/social and critical meaning-making processes? (Negotiated) (Hyun & Marshall, in review).

This paper simply intends to initiate a critical dialogue in conventional early childhood curriculum practice to stop perpetuating some of the historical mistakes.

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